



# Hedging Strategies in Transparent Peer Review: A Genre-Based Analysis

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**Abstract**— *This study investigates the use of hedges in the emerging genre of academic writing known as Transparent Peer Review (TPR). Unlike traditional blind review processes, TPR Writing Process, characterized by its open and inclusive nature, reveals the entire peer review process publicly, and thus allows academic readers to access reviewer reports and authorial responses along with the published article. Drawing on a corpus of twenty TPR reports from various Publications, this study aims to explore the role of hedges in transparent peer review. Using qualitative methods to explore several dimensions of hedging in this genre, it seeks to understand whether researchers and scholars participating in TPR employ hedges, what types of hedging strategies are used by reviewers and authors, how prevalence differs between these participant groups, and what functions hedges fulfil in the transparent review process. Drawing on a corpus of twenty TPR reports from Publications—an international quarterly peer-reviewed open-access journal—this investigation employs qualitative methods to explore several dimensions of hedging in this specific genre. The findings revealed that even though both authors and reviewers employ hedging techniques in their correspondence during the TPR process, the former use fewer hedges than the latter. It was also found that lexical hedges are predominate over strategic hedges. On the other hand, the functions of hedging in the TPR reports we have analyzed remain the same as their functions in other academic genres as to softening the truth value of the claim, showing the writer's commitment to be a responsible and informed member of the scholarly community, and demonstrating awareness of one's audience etc.*



**Keywords**— *English for Academic Purposes, Transparent Peer Review, Hedges*

## I. INTRODUCTION

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is a broad and multi-dimensional field in English language studies. Unlike General English, ESP mainly focuses on teaching, learning, researching, and using English according to the specific needs of a particular group of learners. ESP is designed for learners who need English for clearly defined specific academic, professional, occupational, or technical purposes. Unlike the traditional English language pedagogy which sees the language as a somewhat natural phenomenon molded by those socio-cultural factors that shaped the history of England (and later on, the British

Empire), ESP sees English as a “tool,” a means to an end not an end in itself (Paltridge & Starfield, 2013).

In this sense, ESP's approaches to teaching and learning English are heavily dictated by the reality that necessitates the demand of the language, the real-life situations in which the language is practically put into action in the users' day-to-day activities. The functional nature of ESP has led to the emergence of various sub-branches within the field. The sub-fields of ESP include English for Occupational Purposes (EOP), English for Vocational Purposes (EVP), English for Medical Purposes (EMP), and English for Academic Purposes (EAP), to

mention but a few examples, and “[t]ypically (although not always) ESP students are adult learners” (Paltridge & Starfield, 2013: p.14). This demographic or occupational characteristic of ESL necessitates that ESP pedagogy be shaped according to adult learning requirements and needs.

The unparalleled status acquired by English as a global language of teaching and learning as well as research and publication gives rise to a branch of ESP known as English for Academic Purposes (EAP). “A major research field in its own right, EAP is concerned with researching and teaching the English needed by those who use the language to perform academic tasks” (Charles, 2013: p.145). While this definition broadens the scope of EAP, it also brings with it another distinctive feature of the field. An interesting peculiarity of EAP that distinguishes it from all other subfields of ESP is that it concerns non-native speakers and native speakers (Charles, 2013, p.145). As Charles (2013) points out, the vast area of EAP could be reduced or instead approached from one of these “three angles, each based on a different approach: corpus-based work, genre analysis, and investigation of the social context (p.245). In EAP, writing skills occupy a central position in all academic activities and it is an inherent and integral part of both learners’ and scholars’ academic lives. This requirement stems from the deep-rooted tradition of academia: scholars and researchers are requested by the tradition of academia to put their ideas and findings in black and white to document and communicate them across the audience.

Academic writing is strictly formal in the literal sense of the word and it brings with it strict writing conventions and standards. It is governed by objectivity and controlled by clarity of purpose. It involves the communication of ideas and research in a clear, concise, and structured manner. It follows a well-organized structure, typically including an introduction, thesis statement, body paragraphs, and conclusion. Each section has a specific purpose and contributes to the overall coherence of the piece.

One of the fundamental principles of academic writing, which is objectivity, makes it almost impossible to use one's personal opinions, and whenever used, they must be supported by evidence and logical reasoning. As a result, academic authors are expected to avoid emotional, biased, or subjective language and present their arguments in a balanced and verifiable manner. In this sense, objectivity strengthens the credibility of academic texts and helps readers evaluate ideas based on facts rather than personal judgments.

Another important feature of academic writing is that it has a genre-specific nature. Not only do different

academic disciplines have different conventions and expectations; but even within a particular field, rules, format and conventional styles used for a research article may vary substantially from those needed to write a thesis in the same discipline. Consequently, understanding the genre conventions within a particular field is crucial for understanding and practicing academic writing.

Genre Analysis (GA) emerges as an offshoot of the pioneering work of Move Analysis carried out in the 1990s by Swales. As Hyland notes “Genre approaches in ESP, therefore, attempt to explicate particular genres’ lexicogrammatical and discursive patterns in order to identify their recognisable structural identity. (Hyland in Paltridge & Starfield, 2013: p.108). Also, Swales (1990: 58) defines genre as “a class of communicative events, the members of which share some set of communicative purposes” (in Charles, 2013: p.149). Building on Hyland's definition that this study aims to investigate the use of hedges in transparent peer review, one of the newly emerging genres of academic writing.

Hedging refers to using certain linguistic and rhetorical elements in academic writing to lessen/soften the truth value of a particular claim or statement. This could be achieved using certain vocabulary items, phrases or even particular syntactic structures. “In academic writing,” writes Ken Hyland, “hedges signal a writer’s anticipation of the possibility of opposition to his or her statements” (2005: p.100). In this sense, Hyland enumerates three roles of hedging: 1) helping writers state “propositions with greater precision” or make “uncertain statements with appropriate caution,” 2) assisting “writers to avoid personal responsibility for statements in order to protect their reputations and limit the damage which may result from categorical commitments” and 3) creating a cordial “writer-reader relationship” built on mutual respect and cooperation (2005: p.102).

According to IOP Publishing (n.d.), Transparent Peer Review “shows the complete peer review process from initial review to final decision when both authors and reviewers opt-in. This means that readers can see a full peer review history, alongside the published article, including reviewer reports, editor decision letters, and the authors’ responses” (TPR). Contrary to the traditional method of review used by academic research publishers in which the entire review processes take place behind closed doors and the potential author is only informed about the outcome, whether his research paper is accepted or rejected, and about what kind of corrections are necessary in the case of conditional acceptance, TPR involves authors in the review process by sharing both the reviewers’ comments—through which authors may be

asked to revise or improve their manuscripts—and the editors’ decision letters, thereby ensuring clarity and active participation throughout the evaluation process. Authors are then requested to provide explanations for those critical aspects of their work about which there might be disagreement or incongruity or which might have fallen short of the journal’s and/or publisher’s standards. Ultimately, at the end of this tedious, rigorous review process, when the paper is accepted for publication, the entirety of correspondence between the author(s) and their reviewers is made public as it is published side by side with the article: This is a practice that deservedly qualifies the new method of reviewing scientific research papers as transparent. This gives TPR a universal trustfulness, which all publishing houses, journals, reviewers and researchers ought to strive to maintain (Beynon, 2023). This commitment to openness is also one of the key assumptions underlying the philosophy behind TPR (TPR, 2022). Therefore, TPR can be described as a newly emerging genre of academic writing, constituting a critical scholarly discourse between authors of research articles and their reviewers. In light of this, this study examines twenty transparent peer-review reports of articles published in *Publications*, an international, quarterly, peer-reviewed, open-access journal.

## 1.2 Research Questions

This study attempts to provide answers to the following research questions:

- 1) Do researchers/scholars who engage in transparent peer review process use hedges?
- 2) What type of hedging do reviewers and authors use?
- 3) Who uses hedges more frequently between authors and reviewers?
- 4) What functions do hedges serve in the transparent review process?

## 1.3 Significance of the Study

The significance of this study lies in the fact that even though there are numerous studies investigating the use of hedges in EAP, to the best knowledge of the researcher, no research has been conducted on this particular genre “transparent peer review reports”. Thus, this study fills a significant gap in the literature related to academic hedging by examining a new genre that embodies a unique dialogic correspondence between authors and reviewers.

## II. METHODOLOGY

### 2.1 Type of Study

This is a qualitative study as it does not attempt to offer any numerical (i.e., quantitative) analysis of its

findings. Instead, after conducting a content analysis of twenty transparent peer review reports, identifying the use of hedges, the types of hedges used by the authors and the reviewers and the purposes the hedging served, the researchers present their findings and discuss them qualitatively. As Klaus Krippendorff (2004) puts it, “Qualitative researchers support their interpretations by weaving quotes from the analysed texts and literature” (p.103). Accordingly, in order to align this study with the essential requirements of the qualitative methodology, the researchers thrust the entire weight of his explanations into words (rather than numbers) during both the presentation of the research findings and the discussion.

### 2.2 Data

Since this study concerns content analysis of written texts, it does not have humans as participants. Rather, the review reports of twenty research papers published through the TPR process in the journal *Publications* were analysed with a view to exploring the use of hedges by both the authors and the reviewers. Consequently, these reports serve as the data sources in this study.

### 2.3 Data Collection and Analysis

The data of this research came from a journal called *Publications*. *Publications* is an international, peer-reviewed, open-access journal on scholarly publishing, which is published quarterly online by MDPI (Multidisciplinary Digital Publishing Institute) Switzerland. MDPI publishes 433 journals across a wide range of disciplines and sub-disciplines. However, the data of this research was collected from only one of those journals, *Publications*, which met the researcher’s criteria: being an open-access journal, being multidisciplinary in its contents coverage and being published through the TPR process. The research articles and the transparent peer review reports of the twenty papers were accessed online and later downloaded in PDF by the researchers. Following this, each report was subjected to a rigorous content analysis in which the use of hedges was critically examined and documented.

### 2.4 Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework used in this study was originally developed by Ken Hyland (1999). Specifically, Hyland’s taxonomy of hedging offers the diverse ways in which writers hedge their statements in academic discourse. The use of hedges allows authors to strike a delicate balance that must be maintained between asserting claims and acknowledging the inherent uncertainties in research or academic discussions. In addition to the establishing the rhetorical relevance of hedging, this theoretical framework highlights the social/interpersonal functions of hedges as they enable authors to acknowledge

the invaluable contribution of their audience. This social (interactive) aspect of Hyland's theory of hedges makes it very relevant to the present research because authors and reviewers are considered as "equals" in the TPR process, which is the focus of this research. According to this theory, even though hedges are mainly lexical items, hedging can also be achieved through the employment of certain sentence structures (Hyland, 2005, p.102). This hedging strategy that goes beyond the lexical level (and involves the sentence as a whole) is herein referred to as strategic hedging.

### III. FINDINGS

After critically analysing twenty TPR reports and examining the use of hedges by the authors and the reviewers, the researcher found that in TPR, hedging follows a certain pattern/order. Both the authors and the reviewers seem to be highly conversant with the logic and also with the conventions governing their intellectual transaction and each group applies that logic dutifully, as is demonstrated in the following sections. It was also found that in TPR hedges are mainly employed to achieve one of the following five communicative goals:

#### 3.1 To Correct a Mistake

"The Paper's title should be revised." When reviewers identify errors or deficiencies which require correction, they consistently employ modal verbs and tentative language to soften the directive force of their suggestions. This hedging strategy maintains collegial rapport while still conveying required necessary changes clearly: "The Introduction should include some essential concepts such as academic publishing or scholarly communication and highlight the connection between open peer review (and its benefits) and open science." "The introduction should also be redesigned." These examples illustrate how the modal verb "should" functions as a hedge as it is transforming what could be perceived as an authoritative command into a collegial recommendation.

#### 3.2 To Express Criticism, Preserving Face

Perhaps the most prevalent function of hedging in TPR is to express critical evaluations without threatening the authors' professional face. Reviewers use a wide range of hedging devices, including epistemic stance markers, personal attribution, and attitudinal qualifiers in order to frame criticisms as subjective impressions rather than objective judgments:

"Therefore, the presenter requirements seem unrealistic."

"I find it quite annoying when I read "one of the reviewers noted,..."

"However, I feel that the text has been carelessly edited."

"Thirdly, although the themes are interesting, I still find the analysis a bit too descriptive."

"The overall purpose of the article appears somewhat confused." In these instances, verbs such as "seem," "find," "feel," and "appear" function as hedging devices that attribute the criticism to the reviewer's perception rather than stating it as an absolute fact. The phrase "I feel that" is particularly noteworthy as it frames even harsh criticism ("carelessly edited") as a personal response, thereby softening its impact.

#### 3.3 To Pose Questions Indirectly

Reviewers frequently use hedges when requesting clarification or additional information, framing direct questions as tentative inquiries. This approach encourages dialogue rather than interrogation.

A reviewer writes: "I was wondering whether participants were native-speakers working in those English-speaking countries."

A reviewer writes: "Line 390 Can the authors be more specific about how OpenBiodiv relates to Bouchot, for example, could it be used to measure compliance with the goals of that declaration? The verb "wonder" transforms a direct question into a tentative musing and it positions the reviewer as curious rather than demanding. In the same way, the use of "can" and "could" presents requests for information as possibilities rather than requirements.

#### 3.4 To Express (Dis)agreement

Both agreement and disagreement expressions are hedged in TPR, but for different rhetorical purposes. When expressing disagreement, reviewers use hedges to avoid confrontation. When expressing agreement or praise, they employ hedges to prevent their endorsements from appearing uncritical:

"I don't think that requirements label [143-145] will really have any use."

"This is an extensive revision of the previous draft. All the issues I've raised have been sufficiently addressed. Thus, I recommend publication."

"The paper looks great and has been very much improved."

"Here, references to Paltridge prevail (I find it very correct to refer to Paltridge's works), but I miss some other relevant references that deal with the language of reviewing/review reports."

"I can't see a clear connection between these two parts."

The phrase "I don't think that" exemplifies negative polarity hedging in which disagreement is



couched in terms of the reviewer's cognitive state rather than the manuscript's deficiencies.

The verb "looks" suggests appearance rather than confirmed quality, while "sufficiently" implies adequacy rather than excellence. The expression "I miss" is particularly subtle; rather than stating "the paper lacks," the reviewer frames the absence as a personal experience, thereby reducing the critical impact.

These examples demonstrate how hedges like "might," "perhaps," "could," and "if possible" communicate varying degrees of obligation. Unlike the stronger "should" we have previously observed, these hedges indicate optional improvements rather than necessary corrections. By doing so they establish a hierarchy of revision priorities that respects author autonomy while still providing guidance.

#### IV. DISCUSSION

As demonstrated in our analysis, we have attempted to answer all of the questions to be investigated. Regarding the first question worded as "do authors and reviewers use hedging in their correspondence during the review process of TPR articles?" our study answers this question in an affirmative way as it revealed numerous instances of the use of hedges in reviewers' comments and authors' responses to them. However, in light of our findings, it is evident that reviewers employ more frequent use of hedges compared to authors. This attitude might be attributed to the fact that even though reviewers are believed to be established experts in their fields, they find it more professional to criticize and/or correct authors without being presumptuous. Probably, they find it more professionally prudent to criticise and correct authors without projecting an air of superiority. This is one of the beautiful functions of hedges: they "not only carry the writer's degree of confidence in the truth of a proposition, but also an attitude to the audience" (Hyland, 1998, p. 350).

Genre-based studies of hedges (Myers, 1992; Slaga-Meyer, 1994 & Fahnestock, 1986) as cited in Hyland (2005) highlight an interesting fact: in academic writing, even within the same discipline, the use of hedges is not evenly distributed. More specifically, some genres such as research articles/papers and theses use hedges more than others such as textbooks. A probable reason for such a variation is that unlike authors of research articles, textbook authors do not need to convince an expert audience of a new interpretation or anticipate the consequences of potential inaccuracies, as most claims are presented as established facts (Hyland, 2005, p.103). Similarly, Arzu Ekoç (2008) investigated the use of hedges

in abstracts and found out that because of their determined effort to get acceptance into the scholarly/scientific community, writers of theses and research articles tend to use hedges more frequently than book writers. Therefore, the findings of this study are in line with the findings of the previous genre-based studies of hedges in respect to the discrepancy between the reviewers' and the authors' use of hedges. As mentioned earlier, reviewers' use of more hedges could be attributed to their strategic attempt to make their suggestions and opinions more persuasive and convincing to authors. By employing hedges, reviewers make it clear that the TPR process involves a scholarly dialogue between authors and reviewers as "[c]ategorical assertions leave no room for dialogue and are inherently face-threatening as they suggest that the arguments need no feedback and relegate the reader to a passive role" (Hyland, 2005, 102). That could also explain reviewers' commitment to ensure that authors (who are active intellectual producers of the articles) have not been relegated to a passive subordinate position within the evaluative dialogues.

Furthermore, when it comes to the typological distribution of hedging devices, it is evident that lexical hedges are by far more utilized than strategic hedges although both lexical and strategic hedges were presented in the findings. The vast majority of the hedges are lexical in nature as they are manifest in almost all types of content word classes such as nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs. An observation worth mentioning here is that the findings also showed that the use of passive voice tended to be the dominant sentence structures used by the reviewers when they employed strategic hedging, whereas, the authors opted for the active voice structures in their construction of strategic hedges. One plausible explanation for this is that when authors use active voice in their response to reviewers, they tend to show more commitment and own the responsibility of what they have done in terms of implementing the necessary corrections and so forth. It gives them back their agency as the key players without whom reviewers will have nothing to review. Simultaneously, the use of active voice conveys their sense of humility, with the undertone that they are neither above mistake, nor too big to make corrections. By doing so, authors manage to subtly communicate that they acknowledge their fallibility and remain receptive to constructive feedback.

TPR articles reviewers' and authors' use of hedges seemed to be targeted towards achieving one of the five main functional goals namely: 1) asking a question/clarification, 2) offering a suggestion 3) expressing agreement or disagreement, 4) expressing criticism and 5) correcting a mistake. Questions were

usually asked more directly using either modals or wh-structure. Such direct questions of this nature serve their purpose efficiently as they don't give room for any ambiguity. They fit well in the context of scientific/scholarly discussion, which demands more seriousness and formality. Similarly, suggestions were given in a similar fashion using more direct words such as suggestion/suggest: "A suggestion is that author provides...; "recommendation / recommend: "I would recommend authors to structure this section into thematic (sub)headings;" and sometimes with the occasional help of modals, while agreements and disagreements were expressed via numerous structures and word choices. However, with (dis)agreements, the findings make it clear that the use of modal auxiliaries is very rare. The use of lexical/main verbs is largely factive and non-factive; in the same way, adjectives and adverbs are equally common here. Likewise, expressing criticisms was achieved mainly through the use of factive and non-factive verbs: "I can't see a clear connection between these two parts," (factive verb 'see' used in the negative to show disagreement); "I find it quite annoying" (factive verb 'find' & adjective 'annoying' used to show disagreement); "I feel that the text has been carelessly edited" (non-factive verbs 'feel' used to show disagreement); "All the issues I've raised have been sufficiently addressed;" (adjective 'sufficiently' used to express agreement). Finally, mistake corrections were done almost always using the modals as in the following: "The introduction should also be redesigned;" and "...the author may want to improve the transparency of his data analysis..." (should & may).

## V. CONCLUSION

As a modest contribution to genre-based research in ESP, this study investigated the use of hedges in a newly established sub-genre, Transparent Peer Review (TPR) which is a relatively new sub-genre of academic writing domain. More specifically, this study investigated the use of hedges in twenty TPR reports in order to explore how the authors and reviewers used hedging in their scholarly exchanges during the review process. The findings revealed that even though both authors and reviewers employ hedging techniques in their correspondence during the TPR process, reviewers use hedges considerably more than authors. Also, lexical hedges are by far more common than strategic hedges while the functions of hedging in the TPR reports that we have analyzed remain the same as their functions in other academic genres such as softening the truth value of the claim, showing the writer's commitment to be a responsible and informed member of the scholarly discourse community, and acknowledging

the active place of one's audience. One limitation of this research is the fact that it did not focus on papers written in any particular research field. Although this approach provided the present research with breadth in terms of covering as many fields as possible, it also means that we can't say much about hedging practices specific to a certain field. Therefore, future research could look from that angle to find out whether reviewers in the hard sciences hedge the same as or differently from those in the humanities?

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